

Yéil Koowú Shaawát

Evaluation Brief



Originally delivered within the Tlingit and Haida Tribal Family and Youth Services Department (TFYS), based in Juneau, Alaska, the Yéil Koowú Shaawát (YKS) curriculum is a family-focused, culturally based counseling and treatment model for Native women in Southeast Alaska. The YKS curriculum was delivered as a women's group that addresses issues of domestic violence, child maltreatment exposure, unresolved grief, and intergenerational trauma—one of the root causes of child maltreatment. The curriculum integrates Western therapies with traditional Native American spiritual healing practices and Southeast traditional Tribal teachings and values. Group meetings make use of talking circles, the medicine wheel, smudging, dipping, sweat lodges, and various group exercises.

The collaborative evaluation of the YKS program, one of five projects that partnered with the Center, found evidence that the curriculum:

- Strengthens cultural identity and restores women's Haa Shuká.¹
- Promotes resilience and healing of intergenerational and historical trauma.
- Contributes to the acquisition of healthy parenting skills and behaviors.

In addition, the partnership revealed insightful lessons about how to conduct culturally congruent, respectful, and mutually valuable evaluations with Tribal communities.

ABOUT THE CENTER

The Children's Bureau (CB) funded the Center for Native Child and Family Resilience (the Center) to gather and disseminate information about Tribally relevant practice models, interventions, and services that contribute substantively to child maltreatment prevention efforts and family resilience developed by and for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. The Center partnered with five project sites for four years (2019–2022) to design or refine, implement, and evaluate their child maltreatment prevention/intervention programs for AI/AN children and families. This brief summarizes lessons and findings from the project-driven evaluation conducted with TFYS in support of building evidence for Tribally led child welfare initiatives.

Portrait of the Yéil Koowú Shaawát Program

The YKS curriculum was developed over the past two decades by staff in TFYS at the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. Originally known as the Native Women Counseling and Treatment Services Initiative, the curriculum was renamed Yéil Koowú Shaawát, which translates to "Raven Tail Woman."

¹ Haa Shuká translated literally means, "our ancestors." It also captures the notion of "our ancestors, ourselves, and our future generations." Haa Shuká is a complex expression of one's relationship to a clan, relatives in other clans, the spirits of the land and animals, and spirits of ancestors who have walked on to the next world. It is an expression of connection and relationality to Tlingit ways of being and knowing. The meaning of Haa Shuká in the context of the curriculum extends to healing and living in a good Tlingit and Haida way within one's environment.



Center for
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The Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (Tlingit & Haida), through the TFYS and Community & Behavioral Services (CBS) departments, has been providing critical services to at-risk Native children and families in Southeast Alaska for over 40 years. The Central Council serves nearly 30,000 Tribal Citizens of the Tlingit and Haida Tribes, each of which has a distinct culture, language, and traditions. There are 14,000 Tlingit and Haida Tribal citizens that reside in Southeast Alaska, with the remainder residing in the lower 48 states. Over 25 percent of Tribal citizens (5,200) live in the Juneau area, with the remaining 75 percent (8,800 Tribal citizens) residing in villages throughout the region. Juneau is a community of about 32,000 people and, like most communities in Southeast Alaska, can only be reached by airplane or boat. Approximately 12 percent of the population is AI/AN.

The curriculum includes three phases completed over the course of one year. Each phase consists of 12–14 weekly lessons. The group meets for approximately three hours at times convenient to the participants, usually in the late afternoon and early evening. All phases provide participants with education and support around issues of childhood trauma, victimization and revictimization, and healing from these past traumas. The issues of alcoholism, addiction, and domestic violence are interwoven throughout the phases because they are pertinent intergenerational issues.

- **Phase I** addresses the building blocks of communication (including expression, discussion, and negotiation skills), conflict resolution, anger management, and problem-solving skills.
- **Phase II** focuses on family of origin issues and past/present relationships.
- **Phase III** uses a Sexual Abuse Talking Circle and deals with post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation, and historical and intergenerational trauma.

THE CENTER'S APPROACH TO EVALUATION

Planning and implementing evaluations involved a collaborative and participatory process governed by the Tribal projects, their participants, and communities, with support from the Center team. This included developing culturally grounded and Tribally driven research questions, methodologies, and instruments. Evaluation work was grounded in Indigenous Ways of Knowing (IWOK) and sought to honor Indigenous ways of communication, incorporate cultural values, and integrate traditional knowledge gathering passed down through generations. To this end, the project team engaged with community members; sought the wisdom of Elders; participated in the oral tradition, storytelling, and ceremonies; and committed to keeping community values and context at the center of the work.

Like many Tribally driven approaches to intervening on child maltreatment, YKS takes a strength-based approach to healing, which emphasizes the importance of cultural resiliencies and protective factors. Such protective factors often center on affirming Native identity through connecting with locally distinct Native cosmologies and spiritual traditions (which include, among other things, connecting with traditional food-ways, kinship circles, the oral tradition, song, dance, Native language, and traditional healers). A fundamental aspect of this curriculum is healing trauma and thus intervening upon and preventing child maltreatment through a reclamation of Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural identity, and peer/kinship support systems.

TFYS staff delivered the curriculum with the support and partnership of group alumni, who are knowledgeable about the cultural values of Southeast Tribes and possess in-depth understanding of Alaska Native families and life, intergenerational trauma, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, abuse, community response, and the importance of the delivery of social services.

Story of the Evaluation

A team led by TFYS staff, working in partnership with the Center, documented and evaluated the YKS curriculum, with a plan to evaluate implementation, outcome, and cost components. To support the evaluation, TFYS staff and the Center team worked collaboratively to identify opportunities to collect and gather information needed to understand women's progress in their healing journeys (outcomes), how the curriculum works (implementation), and the level of effort to deliver the curriculum (cost).

RIBBON CEREMONY

During a graduation event for program participants, the Center team was invited on stage to take part in a Ribbon Ceremony acknowledging the growing trust and relationship between the Center team and women's group in a sacred circle of trust, furthering an atmosphere of sharing and safety.

Working together, the TFYS and CNCFR teams designed an evaluation practice that balances numerous demands by weaving the best parts of Western-style evaluation, IWOK, and community-based participatory research together into a framework that enabled us to assist project staff, their Tribal participants, and community members to document processes, frame outcomes, and make sense of findings—creating the conditions that allowed for effectively telling their story and sharing it with others as appropriate.

The evaluation began with processes to establish a foundational partnership with the YKS team, conduct readiness and evaluability assessment, and develop research questions. As part of this

process, we sought to better understand and assess the evaluability of the program by using a guided storytelling tool that was developed in coordination with the Center's IWOK workgroup, which started by simply asking our new partners to tell us about their community and the story of their program during an initial onsite visit with the program that also led to a teaming agreement. The Center team returned for an onsite visit to work with the community on completing the process of the Pathway to Change which serves as an Indigenous approach to creating logic models that are relevant to Tribal communities. This tool created a foundation for developing the work plan.

The Center team listened carefully and engaged in a meaningful discussion about the evaluation through a lens of Indigenous empowerment and expressed the commitment to see the interaction as an opportunity to tell their story of the program. To guide this process, the team used a community-driven evaluation planning tool² created in partnership with the Center team and the Center's IWOK workgroup. The tool helped foster important dialogue about how to tell the story of effectiveness using a Tribally driven participatory evaluation framework.

To inform the development of research questions grounded by the TFYS community that also embodied the curriculum's outcomes of interest, its long-term goals, and the traditional values of the Tlingit and Haida Tribe, the Center engaged the TFYS and women's group members in multi-session mind mapping activities. The mind mapping process culminated in a visual presentation of the curriculum's key values, theories of change, and outcomes of interest, and most importantly, established the cultural metaphor of restoring Haa Shuká that became the backbone of the evaluation and its research questions.

2 The tool can be accessed in the full [Evaluation Report](#).



Information gathering sources for the evaluation components were:

IMPLEMENTATION SOURCES	WOMEN'S HEALING SOURCES	COST SOURCES
Attendance logs	Talking circles following each phase of the curriculum	Cost (time) log journal
Facilitator fidelity logs	Participant personal reflections in one of three formats (letter to self, photos, visual narrative)	Cost (time) log debrief discussion
Weekly sticky note polls	Meaning-making interviews with participants following the creation of personal reflections	
Facilitator interviews		
Talking circles		

Participants were informed about the evaluation, their rights as participants, and the steps of the information gathering process. The Personal Reflections activity gave participants the choice of medium in describing who they were at the time and who they hoped to be when they graduate or finish the curriculum. This was a popular activity that gave participants the opportunity to demonstrate their healing journey along with their hopes, fears, dreams, and intentions for themselves, their children, and family.

How We Served the Community

Throughout the partnership, the Center worked intentionally with the community and program leaders, co-creating tools and resources to document their program’s model and successes so that other AI/AN child welfare organizations could adapt and implement in their own Tribal settings. The lead facilitator teamed with the Center to closely examine the existing curriculum, refine materials, create guides for each lesson, and more fully develop the YKS curriculum. This work led to a four-volume facilitator’s guide for use by others interested in implementing the program, which was published on the Center website along with a supporting implementation guide and the evaluation report. Printed copies of these products were provided to the YKS program.

One of the goals of the project was to support the community in creating lasting materials for the program to sustain the project’s legacy for many years to come. The Center collaborated with the program to develop a legacy plan and the project story video, designed to support the understanding of the program, its origin, and its history. The Center supported the program in preparing materials for dissemination at conferences and other venues, including support to YKS staff with travel, developing materials, and implementing their presentation at the 2023 National Indian Child Welfare Association Conference (NICWA).

As the partnership period drew to a close, the Center supported the YKS team with planning and preparing to implement a new cohort of the women’s group, following the original leader’s retirement. The Center team contracted with the original leader to provide coaching support to the project site as they worked to use the new materials developed as a guide in implementing the group and provided

Forms of Information Gathering

	<p>Informed Consent We will start by providing you with a form explaining your rights as a participant in this evaluation. You will also have an opportunity to ask questions.</p>		<p>Weekly Sticky Note Poll Each week, we will ask you to describe something you learned, felt, or took away from that week’s lesson.</p>
	<p>Virtual Talking Circles At the end of each phase, we’ll talk with you about what you learned and the impact on you and your family.</p>		<p>Personal Reflection Through writing, photography, or other forms of art, you’ll create a personal remembrance of your healing journey in this program.</p>
	<p>Meaning Making Interview At the end of each phase, we’ll talk with you about all the evaluation activities you participated in.</p>		<p>Final Report Review You will have a chance to review the final report that CNCFR writes and provide comments to our team.</p>



concrete resources to help secure meeting space, online access to sessions through Zoom, and food and office supplies.

What We Learned

To tell this story, we first must make an important note about the term “outcomes,” which suggests a static result, effect, or product. That is not how we understand or employ this term in the context of this report. These are the sacred healing stories of women, gathered with the utmost intention to honor the lived experience, wisdom, and healing power they contain. Moreover, the effects of the group are not time-bound or individualized because the program helps heal the community by using the community’s culture and traditions to heal these women and their families.

Across all sources we found evidence that the Yéil Koowú Shaawát curriculum:

- **Strengthens cultural identity and restores women’s Haa Shuká**

Specifically, women reported improved emotional self-awareness, self-efficacy, coping skills, and communication skills. They experienced heightened empathy and an increased ability to trust and forgive themselves and others. They experienced healing through strengthened cultural identity and connection to cultural values. As one participant shared:

“I learned so much about myself, my family, and my culture. And it really had a profound effect on my life.”

- **Promotes resilience and healing of intergenerational and historical trauma**

Through an understanding of intergenerational and historic trauma women made new connections to their circumstances, contemporary traumas, histories, relationships, and futures. They found commonalities among themselves, ancestors, and other women through understanding their ancestors’ experiences, both positive and negative. As one participant explained:

“This is my second time participating in Yéil Koowú Shaawát. It has strengthened me. It has kept me alive and it’s providing me with the knowledge and strength to break the generational cycles of abuse stemming from historical trauma.”

- **Contributes to the acquisition of healthy parenting skills and behaviors**

Like many Tribally driven approaches to preventing and intervening upon child maltreatment, the YKS curriculum takes a strength-based approach to healing. The findings suggest the curriculum’s emphasis on healing trauma through the reclamation of IWOK, promotion of cultural identity and protective capacities, and peer kinship support systems, coupled with both Western and Native healing modalities, strongly correlated with the acquisition of healthy parenting skills and behaviors. As one participant related:

“I can pass on what I learned, show them how, so they can learn what not to do, any trouble or anything, stress, anything like that—how to cope with it a lot better, instead of lashing out in anger. I also think my daughter feels more relaxed too. I’ve been showing her what I’ve learned all this year and she’s more comfortable with me now.”

THE HEALING VILLAGE

The Healing Village was designed to be a community-based group supporting the process of validation and meaning-making from the gathered evaluation information. The group, composed of recent alumni of the Yéil Koowú Shaawát program, a local Tlingit Elder and knowledge bearer, program facilitators, and Center team members, met to review the preliminary findings, reflect on the language used to describe the journey of participants, and provide oversight in ensuring appropriate understanding of the information and accurate application of the findings to better understand the program and its impact on the community. Through facilitated Talking Circles held using an online platform, the Healing Village members engaged in reflection and storytelling in response to high-level summaries of program outcomes.



Women’s group members who participated in evaluation processes felt listened to and were willing to participate in evaluation activities when data collection methods were developed based on their input. This process contributed to their receptivity to sharing personal, difficult accounts of trauma as well as their healing journeys. Participants’ desire to engage in activities promoted critical thinking, self-exploration, and analysis based on personal reflections that provided a creative space that supported their healing journey. This suggests that involving participants in the development of data collection methods contributed to the depth of findings and overall success of the evaluation process.

“[The Center team] really listened. From the very beginning, the very first talking circle . . . and what came out of that has everything to do with how we proceeded with gathering material and collecting data. For example, I remember a couple of different interviews where they [the women in the group] are specifically telling you, ‘yeah, I’d like to do something like write or I’d like maybe to do it in a more creative artistic way, or maybe I would like to take photographs’ I think your willingness to be open and innovative like that led to some pretty spectacular [personal reflection] projects that we came up with.”

— Group Leader

Active listening along with practicing humility and co-creation was a vital collaborative strategy that aided in building trust and supported innovative approaches to develop evaluation plans, information-gathering methodologies and tools, and an analysis that understands meaning. This meant intentionally practicing humility and engaging in co-creating to facilitate trust-building among the Center team, facilitators, and participating women.

Additional recommendations for future evaluations include:

- Ensure that there would be sufficient time and flexibility built into the process to engage in a genuinely participatory approach.
- Promote IWOK and achieve the effective partnership required for elevating the cultural values of humility, reciprocity, and understanding and internalizing Tribal sites’ history with research abuses and historic and ongoing trauma.
- Build relationships early, even before the planning phase, and anchor those efforts in respect, trust, and openness.
- Use consultants or staff members who understand IWOK, know how to incorporate it into research, and have worked with Tribal projects in the past. Be attentive to growing the capabilities of more junior or inexperienced staff.
- Ensure that readiness assessments tell a complete and detailed story about where projects are and what they need to advance.

Despite difficult challenges and realities, shining a light on stories of success and opportunities for growth in a culturally grounded way is empowering for communities. Using an evaluative approach that honors IWOK principles and reflects the community’s needs and questions about the efficacy of the program helps ensure that the evaluation’s results are processes and products that have a high level of utility for the community and provide an opportunity for the community to tell their program’s story. Through active listening, trust building, authentic collaboration, and constant reflection, researchers and evaluators working with Tribes can build important relationships with their Indigenous community partners and, in return, be gifted with the stories of their programs and the people they serve.

Acknowledgements

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Yéil Koowú Shaawát Program

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Resources

The following products about the program were developed through the Center/[YKS](#) partnership:

- [Yéil Koowú Shaawát Implementation Guide](#)
- Yéil Koowú Shaawát Facilitator’s Guide
 - [Introduction](#)
 - [Phase I: Anger, Stress, and Communication](#)
 - [Phase II: Personal and Family Development](#)
 - [Phase III: Sexual Abuse Talking Circle](#)
- [Yéil Koowú Shaawát Evaluation Report](#)